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THE CHICAGO PERIOD

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At the second meeting of the Board of Trustees of the University of Chicago, held September 18, 1890, a nominating committee reported recommending as president of the new university Professor William Rainey Harper, of Yale. "The report was adopted," says the minute-book of the board, "and Dr. Harper was elected by a unanimous and a rising vote." Professor Harper asked that he might be allowed to withhold his answer for six months. His letter of acceptance was dated New Haven, February 16, 1891, and he entered formally upon his new duties on the first day of July in the same year.

Alluring indeed was the creative opportunity offered him in Chicago. A university was to be built from the ground up, most fortunately located just within the limits of a great city, assured of ample resources, and subject only to the conditions that two-thirds of the trustees were to be Baptists, and that the Baptist Union Theological Seminary at Morgan Park was to be its divinity school. To the young president these conditions were in no sense restrictions. They were assurances rather that it was to be his privilege to work in a familiar and welcome companionship, and with a free hand. Precedents for the vast undertaking to which he was committed there were none. But if traditions to guide him were wanting, neither were there any to hamper. The doors of the old University had now been closed five years, and the acrimonious debate over what it had done, and what it had failed to do, had quite died out. A considerable body of its alumni, who might otherwise have stood apart from the new institution, unsympathetic and critical, were promptly and generously adopted by it, and became at once its cordial and loyal supporters. The jest was current in those early days that the University manufactured its immemorial customs while its walls were building, and boasted an organized body of alumni and a professor emeritus before its first freshman class was enrolled.

The scheme of organization of the University of Chicago, as drawn up by its President, adopted by the Board of Trustees and published in *Official Bulletin No. 1*, dated January, 1891, is one of the most original educational manifestoes ever set forth. Never was a unique invitation accepted with a bolder inventiveness. Not that the plan in any of its features was revolutionary or designedly sensational. Its challenge to criticism lay in the matter-of-fact proposal to do forth-



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with what reformers and theorists had merely dreamed of doing in a distant future. "The work of the University," its opening sentence read, "shall be arranged under three general divisions, viz.: the University Proper, the University Extension Work, the University Publication Work." Nothing is more characteristic of the eager and confident spirit in which then and always President Harper attacked his problems than his refusal to admit that the organization of the second and third of these "general divisions" might prudently be postponed

until the "University Proper" had been fairly set going. These three divisions were essential to his far-sighted and noble conception of a university, and the University of Chicago would fall below its magnificent opportunity if it were not equipped with at least the essential things at the outset. The result has abundantly justified the practical idealism of this extraordinary plan. Ten years' experience of its everyday working has led to the modification of relatively unimportant details, but its distinguishing features, the "four-quarters system," with its attendant scheme of examinations and credits, the quarterly convocations, the flexible adjustment of vacations, the arrangement of courses in "majors" and "minors," the organization of the students by colleges rather than by classes, the value set upon non-resident work, are in successful operation today. It is the scheme of one who believed, in his own words, that "the university is an institution of the people and born of the democratic spirit."

Perhaps none of the trustees of the University at all realized the full import of the action of the board when, immediately after Dr. Harper's formal acceptance of the presidency, it appointed him, April 11, 1891, Head Professor of the Department of Semitic Languages and Literatures. It was proper, of course, that recognition should thus be made of his eminent scholarship. He might well enough, consistently with other and more important duties, have the oversight of the instruction given in this department, and lend to it the prestige of his name. But the President had already settled it with himself, as the indispensable condition of acceptance of the call to leave Yale for Chicago, that he must still hold his place in the classroom. It was not only that he loved more than anything else to teach, and that he knew that upon the continuance of regular study depended the maintenance of his citizenship in the republic of scholars. He had already recognized his calling of God to further and extend by every possible means the popular study of the Bible. That he might show himself faithful to this high calling was, from the beginning of his career at Morgan Park, the ruling desire, the mastering passion, of his life. To fail to appreciate this fact is to misunderstand President Harper altogether. Never for an hour did he relinquish this ambition. Once when the trustees feared that he might break down under very heavy and, as it seemed at the time, unavoidable

administrative duties, and in their solicitude urged him to abandon his professorship and all that it involved, submitting thus to a hard necessity, but a necessity nevertheless, he answered without a moment's hesitation: "If I must choose, my choice is made. Another president is easily found. I will go gladly to my books and my pupils." In the office of the University Recorder Professor William R. Harper's class reports may be seen today, made out in due form and bound up with those of his colleagues. Quarter by quarter, year by year, the record of his classroom work goes on, with hardly more interruption than that which the service of any other instructor of equal rank sustained. When University instruction began in the autumn of 1892, in its first schedule of studies the President offered courses in "Advanced Hebrew Grammar" and in "Arabic." Later, to name titles at random, his courses were "Old Testament Prophecy," "Minor Prophets of the Assyrian Period," "Ethiopic," "Hexateuchal Analysis," "Earlier Suras of the Koran." For several years he gave the Old Testament survey course required of all candidates for a Divinity School degree. Would anyone who knew him only in the classroom have guessed that this tireless and enthusiastic instructor was finding time and strength also for the most scrupulous and detailed attention to the multifarious engagements and engrossing claims of the president of a university which was still in the making? It is amazing to recall that in the summer quarter of 1905, when he knew that the sentence of death against him had gone out, he was still giving regular classroom instruction, and that he even announced courses for the succeeding quarter.

But Dr. Harper's work as a teacher could never be narrowed to the discharge of the routine duties, however important and arduous, of a professor of Semitics. Already at Yale he had entered upon a signally successful propaganda of Bible study by means of public lectures and correspondence courses. This effort was continued at Chicago with unabated energy and enthusiasm. Two of the most popular outline correspondence courses, "The Work of the Old Testament Sages" and "Foreshadowings of the Christ," were prepared here; and a series of lectures on the book of Genesis early in his Chicago residence aroused very wide interest. If his frank disavowal of traditional interpretations alarmed some, many more found in his

reverent constructive criticism a glad release from the haunting misgiving that, under the handling of modern scholarship, the Bible would no longer appear the supreme revelation of God to man. The American Institute of Sacred Literature was transferred to Chicago, and its work widened and enriched. Two journals, dating in their inception from the Morgan Park period—*Hebraica*, now the *Journal of Semitic Languages and Literatures*, and the *Old and New Testament Student*, today the *Biblical World*—came with him also, and remained under his editorial control to the day of his death, the objects of mingled solicitude and pride. No one who was so fortunate as to be among his guests on that occasion will ever forget the dinner with which he celebrated the twenty-first anniversary of two events, the appearance of the first number of the *Hebrew Student* and the birth of his eldest son. To the list of periodical publications called into existence by his enthusiasm for the dissemination of sound Christian learning must be added the *American Journal of Theology*, “edited by the Divinity Faculty of the University of Chicago,” whose first number is dated January, 1897.

The crowning achievement, however, of President Harper’s lifelong biblical activity was the organization, three years ago at a convention, the call for which was issued by the Council of Seventy of the American Institute of Sacred Literature, of the Religious Education Association. Its career has hardly begun, but it is not rash to prophesy that this heir of his loftiest ideals and his purest ambitions will yet appear, in the reckoning up of his contributions to the higher life of the American people, worthy to be ranked with the University itself.

Always in the midst of these incessant and varied labors for the furtherance of biblical learning and religious education throughout the country, Dr. Harper held steadily in mind the claims upon him of the young men and women of the University. The end of all school discipline and instruction, he was never tired of repeating, is character. From the beginning he had taken thought for the religious needs of his students, giving to the University a chaplain, establishing later the university preachership, offering official recognition and support to the religious organizations of the undergraduate body, planning Sunday-afternoon lectures on biblical themes, and

conferences for the discussion of questions relating to Christian belief and conduct.

A unique organization, to which he gave much care and thought, is the Christian Union of the University, upon whose official board its many and varied religious activities are represented by instructors and students alike. One of the memorable occasions of his last years was the conference of men and women interested in the different aspects of the religious life of the University, meeting one evening in his study to consider ways and means for the advancement in the University of practical religion. How keenly he appreciated the approval given to the new plans proposed by him, and the pledges to support them! No one who listened to his urgent appeal for co-operation could doubt that this was the matter which of all others lay nearest his heart, this the responsibility for which he held himself most strictly to account.

The final word in a story too briefly told within the limits set upon this article must be given to the great task assumed while still at Yale, and with which he was engaged during his entire University service. Whatever might be the duty claiming attention at the present moment, in the background lay the commentary upon the Minor Prophets which he had entered into contract to write; and pleasurable anticipations of a laboriously won vacation took oftenest the form of an interval of withdrawal from all University occupations and engagements to give himself wholly to his Hebrew texts. The last and longest of these retreats was the six months of the summer and autumn of 1904, spent at Williams Bay, Wis., engaged in the most congenial employment of his life. Never again was he to know days so quiet and so fruitful as these. In the goodness of God, it was permitted him to take into his hands before he died the printed volume *Amos and Hosea*. In other books, *The Trend in Higher Education* and *Religion and the Higher Life*, he had collected papers which expressed his matured conclusions upon matters which had necessarily engaged his attention; this was his contribution, wrought out through years of toil and sacrifice, not unmixed with joy, to that supremely important task of Christian scholarship—the interpretation afresh to its own generation of the ancient and imperishable oracles of God.